

Road Trip: B.C.'s sustainable wineries

Environmentally friendly vineyards make an interesting tour and provide some very drinkable wines

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SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY PROVINCE

These five Okanagan wineries have a number of things in common: fascinating tours, exquisite wines and innovative, environmentally friendly agriculture.

With seemingly endless miles of pristine lakes, sandy beaches, and scenic strolls, The Okanagan Valley is one of the most beautiful destinations in the world. Add to that its thriving agricultural scene, where orchards, vegetable farms and vineyards abound (217 licensed wineries at last count), and the table is set for a truly decadent getaway.

A growing number of Okanagan wineries are taking steps to protect this extraordinary landscape while continuing to produce premium wines that reflect the unique terroir of their vineyards. With friends in tow, I visited five of my favourite wineries, driving from Kelowna to Oliver, tasted some exquisite wines, and learned about the array of environmentally friendly approaches these winemakers and viticulturists are taking to lead the sustainable way.

It's very exciting to see how the passion for what they're doing translates into the glass. Drinking wine is an enjoyable experience to begin with, but since my discovery of B.C. wine began I tend to reach for local bottles at the liquor store, getting even more enjoyment from sipping varietals made from ground I've stood on and viticulturists and winemakers I've had the privilege of getting to know.

First stop, Tantalus Vineyards in the hills overlooking Kelowna. Tantalus has some of the oldest vines in the Okanagan, dating back to the early 1970s, and you can taste that history in their Old Vines Riesling — if you can get your hands on one of the coveted bottles. In the winery's modern tasting room, concrete floors and floor-to-ceiling picture windows that look out over the vineyard are juxtaposed with a large collection of First Nation masks carved by Dempsey Bob surrounded by Tantalus's wines which bear different masks on each their labels. Tantalus, with its sleek white energy-efficient building perched above the vineyard, is B.C.'s first certified LEED winery, which means they've put a lot of effort into sustainable site development, water efficiency, energy efficiency, materials selection, and indoor environmental quality. Their approach in the vineyard, said general manager Jane Hatch as we walked around the property, is to think about the surrounding ecosystem as a whole. They have a wild, 10-acre forest in the middle of their approximately 75-acre property, where they house more than 30 bee-



Dozens of heritage breed chickens are unleashed on Le Vieux Pin's vineyard to eat pests, and happily return to their poultry palace after a hard day's work. The nesting boxes are made from used wine barrels. CATHERINE ROSCOE BARR/FOR THE PROVINCE



A panoramic view of Okanagan Crush Pad's Switchback Vineyard, where Pinot Gris is produced. LIONEL TRUDEL/FOR THE PROVINCE

hives for their neighbours at Arlo's Honey Farm, and they practise natural farming in an organic style (but aren't certified).

Five kilometres south, Summerhill Pyramid Winery has been practising organic farming since founder Steven Cipes bought the property in the 1980s. Summerhill achieved certified organic status in 2007 and became

the first Demeter biodynamic certified winery in B.C. in 2012, and three of Steven's four grown sons are now actively involved in the daily operations. One of those sons, CEO Ezra Cipes, gave us an in-depth tour of the property with stops at a quiet clearing in the forest beyond a bright red Japanese bridge, a First Nations lodge, and, of course, the pyramid

— all of which are part of the self-guided tour. Biodynamics is a fascinating "beyond-organic" practice that doesn't stop with the absence of chemicals — its driving principle is to increase ecosystem biodiversity, resulting in better plant immunity and resistance to pests. All of Summerhill's wines — like my go-to bubbly, the award winning Cipes Brut,

and one of my favourite new deep and delicious reds, the Alive Organic Red — are finished in the pyramid, a perfectly precise replica of the Great Pyramid of Egypt, for a minimum of 30 days. A great place to enjoy Summerhill's wines is on the expansive patio at their amazing, 100 per cent organic restaurant, Sunset Organic Bistro.

Located on the west side of Lake Okanagan, about 45 kilometres south of Kelowna, Okanagan Crush Pad, is an innovative custom crush facility in Summerland with nearly a dozen clients, plus their own labels Haywire and Bartier Schofield. They've also begun transitioning to biodynamic farming at their Switchback vineyard where they grow Pinot Gris, and have been totally biodynamic (although not yet certified) from the get-go at their new 312-acre plot in the Garnet Valley. They plan to leave about 250 acres wild, to be used as thoroughfares for resident animals that include mule deer, cougars, coyotes, bears and rattlesnakes. Settle into a chair on the Crush Pad patio where you can pair their wines with your own picnic, or step inside the O Tasting Lounge — be sure to try their juicy Haywire Switchback Vineyard Pinot Gris — and you'll see a row of concrete eggs, Canada's first temperature-controlled egg-shaped concrete fermentation tanks, whose rough insides encourage the growth of natural vineyard yeast. In the vineyard, they've reverted to some old-fashioned farming methods like scything weeds by hand instead of using a tractor, and employing critters like chickens (housed in luxury coop with used wine barrels for nesting boxes) and adorable baby-doll sheep to gobble up pests, act as natural lawn mowers, and provide fertilizing manure.

About 60 kilometres south of Summerland near Oliver, Le Vieux Pin has some cute little helpers supporting their minimal input approach. About 60 chickens of nearly a dozen different breeds, who greet you as pass by on your way to the winery, are unleashed on vineyard pests and happily return to their poultry palace on their own accord after a hard day's work. "The whole philosophy is to have a sustainable vineyard," says winemaker and viticulturist Severine Pinte, who strives to "preserve what we get in the vineyard all the way through," resulting in some exciting wines like their 2011 Ava Viognier (named for her daughter) and 2011 Syrah Cuvee Violette. You'll get the full romantic French experience sipping wines made in the French style in the elegant tast-

ing room, listening to Pinte gracefully describe their character. Outside, clusters of aromatic lavender surround the winery — named for the lone pine tree standing guard over the vineyard.

On the other side of the valley, five kilometres away, Tinhorn Creek's winemaker and CEO Sandra Oldfield is making some exciting wines of her own. "It's doing so well for us," says Oldfield of the buzzed-about 2010 Oldfield Series Cabernet Franc. "Having been here for 20 years, I've always been exploring the same site," says Oldfield, of both their Golden Mile Bench and Black Sage Bench vineyards, which has no doubt had an impact on not only her skill as a winemaker but her connection to the land. Tinhorn Creek became Canada's first carbon-neutral winery and was one of the first Salmon-Safe certified vineyards in B.C. As part of their carbon-neutral efforts, Tinhorn's winery trucks and tractors run on biodiesel and organic leftovers from the winemaking process (seeds, skins and stems) and from their award-winning restaurant, Miradoro, are composted and used to fertilize the vines, while the old vines and other woody materials that are pulled up are used for Miradoro's smoker and pig roasting pit. The restaurant's picture windows and wraparound patio provide the most breathtaking panoramic views of the valley, and the mouth-watering seasonal menu (and wine pairings) makes you want to linger a little longer.

To plan your visit to these sustainable Okanagan wineries, visit winebc.com.

Where to stay:

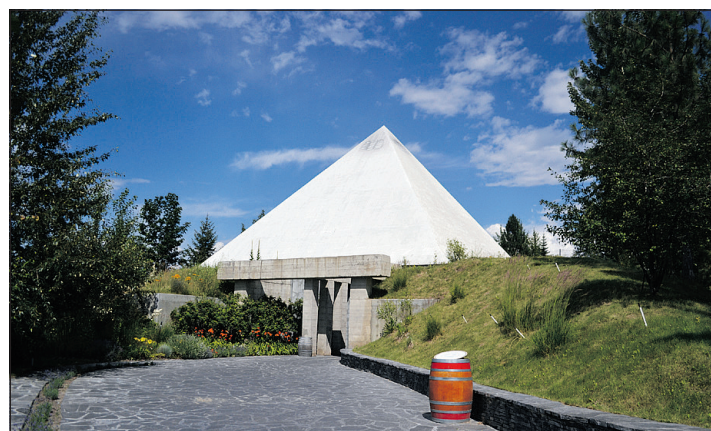
Spirit Ridge, Osoyoos: spiritoridge.ca

Summerland Waterfront Resort, Summerland: summerlandresorthotel.com

Hotel Eldorado, Kelowna: hoteldoradokelowna.com



Acadia, Okanagan Crush Pad co-owner Christine Coletta's dog, benefits from the organic environment she gets to roam. CATHERINE ROSCOE BARR/FOR THE PROVINCE



Summerhill Pyramid Winery's founder Steve Cipes built a perfectly precise replica of the Great Pyramid of Egypt, where all of their wines are finished. AARON BARR/FOR THE PROVINCE



The Tantalus' tasting rooms overlook their vineyard. CATHERINE ROSCOE BARR/FOR THE PROVINCE